

## **New Bern Tea Tables?**

**By**

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The discovery of additional examples for what was initially published as a pair of related 18th century southern tripod tables has grown in numbers to the point that a follow-up will be informative. Many of these tables have turned up in the South but none with a decisive and documented Colonial provenance. The available evidence points to the so called “hourglass” tea table group as being produced in the South but is inconclusive as to a specific area or town (Fig. 1, “Hourglass” Tea Table) (Fig. 2, Birdcage Support of Fig. 1).



Figure 1



Figure 2

Two institutional publications noted that hourglass-shaped supports within the “bird cages” of the two initially published tables, along with the descent of both in the same family, were taken together as evidence of a relationship and possible origin. Using the same evidence, each institution developed a differing position as to the origins of the two tables. The two tables were initially published in The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts’ and Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (VMFA/CWF) 1979 publication, *Furniture of Williamsburg and Eastern Virginia 1710-1790*, see images 121 and 122. The two tables were later published in

the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts (MESDA) 1988 publication, *The Furniture of Coastal North Carolina 1700-1820*, see images 7-15 and 7-16. The tables are listed in the MESDA Object Database, <http://mesda.org/item/object/table-tea/1530/> and <http://mesda.org/item/object/table-tea/1531/> as reference numbers S-1530 and S-1531.

This article documents comparisons of additional tables and unexamined, or at least previously unpublished, traits exhibited within this group of tables. This is offered as evidence that may further bond the group together and potentially extend the numbers of those within the group. Twelve tables have been physically examined that appear to be from the same group based on shared and similar characteristics. Both the design variations and similarities were reviewed by direct, *in situ*, physical comparison of eight examples. Photographs of another seven tea tables were reviewed including the two published by VMFA/CWF and MESDA.

Institutions, and some collectors, are obsessed with tying individual pieces of furniture to specific makers. Representatives of institutions have stated that unique items, or those for which there are uncertain origins, are more likely to be relegated to institutional storage than placed on public display or included in its publications. Institutions



avoid uncertainty. Many serious collectors are less concerned with an object's maker than with the physical attributes of an object, and some collectors value rare or unique items. An item's origin, condition, rarity, and appearance are important factors for many collectors but a valid provenance, whether maker or owner, does increase interest. However, all should be skeptical of the "story" accompanying an object since none of us were there when the object was commissioned, made, or initially purchased. That said, regardless of its merits, the "story" has consistently proven to be important to many collectors and institutions. The "story" has proven important at the point of sale - auctions, shows, and private transactions.

This article not only repeats and evaluates previously published attributions of these "hourglass" tables origins from institutions but also offers other perspectives. Relationships among the individual tables in this group are based on:

- interpreting the direct physical and collective visual evidence;
- deductive and inductive reasoning;
- credible evidence suggesting origin; and
- insights gleaned from interviews with individuals having relevant experience.

The primary focus of this article is tripod tables with large diameter tops, widths similar to the height, that were used to serve tea in Colonial social gatherings. Tripod tables that could provide sufficient space for a social gathering for tea generally have a top diameter greater than its vertical height, which is approximately 28 inches.

The Institutions position:

MESDA's publication lists New Bern, NC as the origin of the two tables but suggested they may have been produced by a Virginian.

VMFA/CWF states "They are undoubtedly Virginia products" but listed the two tables in a section titled "Origin Unknown" since they were not yet confident from which southeast Virginia area they originated. From a southern furniture collector's view either point of origin, or anywhere in between, should be satisfying.

The MESDA research suggests the two tables it illustrated as having a New Bern origin based on a history of ownership by Robert Snead who moved to what is now known as Sneads Ferry. Sneads Ferry is actually closer to Wilmington than New Bern by land or water. However, no furniture having similar design characteristics with certain Wilmington histories are known. Originally known as "the lower ferry", Sneads Ferry was renamed after Robert Snead settled there in the 1760s, within

the period when these tables were produced. The ferry served the King's Highway post road from Boston to Charleston. There was certainly an opportunity for the two tables, light and portable, to have come from any area along the post road.

Both MESDA and VMFA/CWF note that Snead, or least his family, had a Virginia history prior to moving to "the lower ferry". Since these tables were portable, they may have been brought by his family or the tables could have come into Snead's possession when he arrived at the ferry. The ferry crosses the New River near an inlet that connects directly into the Atlantic Ocean, another path for the tea tables to travel from points further.

One of the most recent of these tables to come to light has a verbal history that relates it to the Lee's of Virginia. Nearly all of the tables included in the development of this article have a history of being found in North Carolina or Virginia. A few others, not examined but with the distinctive hourglass colonnettes, have surfaced in South Carolina and Maryland. Since documented origin remains limited for this group premises based on the available evidence follows.

## PREMISES

Similarities?

How similar are the tea table within this group? Direct visual comparisons are the most effective method to evaluate similar objects with slightly different features. Minor details can easily escape notice when observations are made at separate locations, at different times, and, in the case of institutions, by different representatives of the institution. When a related, but not identical, group of objects is assembled together in a single location and compared directly, more accurate observations can be accomplished. Eight of these tables were examined and compared together.

How made?

Were these made by one shop? It is possible that one shop could have produced the known examples. However, when a competing cabinet shop became aware of the market success of a particular design it would also appear on its menu of offerings. Capitalism has a long history. If a number of tables was produced in a single shop, strong similarity among individual tables should be expected. While there are differences among other furniture examples known to be from a particular school, sufficiently strong similarities are a proxy used to associate a “newly discovered” piece of furniture to a known school or cabinetmaker. Minor construction or design details can play a major role in generating sufficient confidence that an object was likely produced in a particular shop.



Date produced?

When were the tables produced? When attempting to establish origin without a definitive provenance, the place of origin or the earliest known history of something, other methods must be employed. A probable date range for the creation of these tables is selected potentially to assist in narrowing the places of origin. The third quarter of the 18th century will be used.

This time period is consistent with the tea table's stylistic features, its purpose, and the availability of the wood used - mahogany. The history of regions examined as possible origins may eliminate or reduce the likelihood of a particular locale based on this time frame. Note that the candlestands in this group, those with smaller diameter tops, may not follow the same assumptions. This may be particularly applicable to the end date assumption where the design elements persist even after the taking of tea declined in American society. Tripod tables with a small diameter top serve different purposes. Cabinet shops were likely to continue using familiar design features for candlestands past the generally accepted timeframe of the period when tea tables were popular.

During this timeframe:

- Ball and claw feet (Chippendale style) - found on all but two of these tea tables became fashionable as a more up-to-date style than Queen Anne style feet. While the Chippendale style persisted into the early 19th century, attitudes toward taking tea abbreviated the market for tea tables. It is worth noting that the Chippendale style resulted in the most innovative statements of uniquely American interpretations than any preceding furniture style.
- Tilting tea tables were popular because the top could be folded vertical and the entire table set out of the way when not in use. Research conducted by CWF overlaying documented furniture inventories over Colonial floor plans illustrated that floor space was often limited in Colonial households. While there were large Colonial homes, homes of lesser floor areas were more prevalent. The CWF research illustrates that floor space was at a premium so furniture designs with spatial efficiency would be desirable.
- The social custom of taking tea reached its height in Colonial America, and tea tables were the key accoutrement in this elaborate ritual. After the 1773 Tea Act of the Parliament of Great Britain, the drinking of tea sharply decreased as many considered it unpatriotic. A later date would not be in keeping with American sentiment for the purchase of “new” tea tables. As previously noted, candlestands of similar designs persisted into the 19th century. *Note: An arbitrary distinction is made in this article*

*between tea tables and candlestands. Tripod tables with tops less than 20 inches in diameter are considered candlestands.*

*Candlestands are intentionally lighter for portability and have tops too small to accommodate a large tea party group.*

- Mahogany first became available in major Colonial port cities in the second quarter of the 18th century. By the beginning of the third quarter, it was widely available throughout the English Colonies. While native woods such as walnut and cherry were abundant, and generally less costly, mahogany conveyed social status since it originated from exotic locales. Taking tea was an opportunity to display refinement and, like the tea leaves, mahogany was an exotic imported material that played a supporting role in a social exercise intended to display refinement and communicate status.
- Several original handmade, round- head screws were present in the battens of a few tables.
- While tea tables were the gathering point for tea, an ensemble of other “necessities” evolved that lent support to the performance. The additional furniture included kettle stands and tea boxes and accessories included tea sets, and “tools” to turn the leaves into a drinkable concoction (Fig. 3, Tea Box) (Fig. 4, Kettle Stand).



Figure 3





Figure 4

So, is Southeast Virginia or the town of New Bern the most likely southern origin for these tables as previous institutional publications claim? Is it possible these were imports that simply passed through Norfolk or New Bern from points further? If these are imports from further points, similar examples would have been made and known in these more distant places of origin. Wherever the tables were made, it is a reasonable premise that related examples would be found dispersed around the location of manufacture.

Evidence for New Bern as the origin:

New Bern is the second oldest town in North Carolina after Bath. It was the Colonial capital of North Carolina and remained the capital after the revolution until 1794 when state government was relocated to Raleigh. Overland access to Colonial New Bern was more constrained by expansive swamps from North Carolina's interior than other Colonial towns in the Coastal Plains of North Carolina and Virginia.

- A tea table with a well- documented provenance from the New Bern area, now in the collection of The Governor's Palace, is of walnut and of an entirely different design (Fig. 5, Governor's Palace Tea Table). A candlestand of nearly identical design

found in New Bern lends additional credence to this design being produced by a local New Bern cabinetmaker.

- New Bern was client of the Rhode Island venture-furniture trade based on the number of examples of Rhode Island furniture present. This would reduce the commercial viability of local cabinetmakers and increase the likelihood that any locally produced tea tables would resemble Rhode Island examples. No examples of tea tables known to be of Rhode Island origin with similar characteristics to this group could be identified in the researched data, literature, or in interviews.
- There are few examples of furniture of any type known with certainty to have originated from New Bern cabinet shops, MESDA only “attributes” pieces to New Bern. This may be due to New Bern’s role as the Crown’s Colonial Capital of North Carolina which increased locals' access to imported English goods. It may be that many pieces of “portable” southern furniture were taken as spoils of war. New Bern was occupied by Union forces during and after the end of the Civil War.



Figure 5



Evidence for the Norfolk area:

Norfolk conducted venture export trade in furniture, had early access to mahogany, and was an important and active Colonial port. The region around Norfolk included Suffolk and Petersburg to the west and to the north, Williamsburg. There are many examples of Colonial furniture from this area that carry strongly documented provenances. Even though Norfolk was a major urban center, tragic events obscure its material culture.

Norfolk burned January 1, 1776, after British warships shelled the town's docks and Colonials apparently set fire to the backside of the town to destroy what could have been an important military base for the British in the American War of Independence. These events destroyed the material culture in Norfolk and created a historical fog as to what had been produced in Colonial Norfolk.

The surviving furniture produced in Norfolk would have been scattered around Norfolk and would constitute much of the remaining material evidence. However, tying an individual piece of furniture back to Norfolk is problematic. The logical deduction is: if the tea tables were produced in or sold through Norfolk, there should be a dispersion of examples around Norfolk in all directions with more found along known

trade or societal migration routes. This “theory” has been dubbed the "Crater Theory" as what is in the crater is obliterated but debris is scattered in all directions.

Evidence for other origins:

What other perspective can this article offer for the possible origin of the hourglass tea tables? In the north, scholars have historically characterized Colonial furniture as produced or directly influenced by one of the major urban centers. Philadelphia, New York City, Newport, and Boston were the largest and most often used reference cities for Colonial furniture styles. This can be done with some degree of confidence based on many signed examples, detailed inventories, and genuine provenances that date back to early area families.

Charleston was the most populous southern city but with less than half that of New York City. Norfolk was the next largest but with one-fourth the population of Charleston. Colonial furniture survives in the greatest numbers in Charleston and has been the most well studied and documented southern city. Studies of Norfolk area furniture are ongoing, but more has been documented about Williamsburg and Fredericksburg productions. Norfolk and Charleston are over 400 miles apart. Philadelphia and Boston are separated by 300 miles with New

York City, Newport, and several cities much larger than Edenton, New Bern, or Wilmington in between.

In this time period, overland travelers in eastern North Carolina encountered a watercourse that had to be crossed on average of every half mile. Most of these watercourses were minor so a horse could easily cross, but many were problematic for wagons carrying goods especially during rainy periods. This is one reason so much Colonial trade traveled the Atlantic Ocean and then used navigable rivers and waterways to reach inland destinations.

In the South, it's more logical that distributed pockets of cabinetmakers in rural areas and small towns built and furnished the southern homes, especially in North Carolina which had a challenging coastline for naval navigation. Documented Colonial cabinetmakers worked in Edenton and Wilmington, but many are known outside of towns. Thomas White in Perquimans County (and later Northampton County), the Sharrock family, and Seay shop in rural Roxobel in Bertie County are well documented examples of rural cabinetmakers producing furniture and millwork for wealthy planter's both in rural areas and for clients in nearby towns. Both Thomas White and Thomas Sharrock were active during the third quarter of the 18th century. These cabinetmakers were

only recently identified, so it is likely many others were in rural areas and are either yet to be found or will never be known.

From a practical standpoint, it is easier to locate a cabinetmaking shop near the source of the raw material, forests, and to transport the lighter and less bulky finished goods to nearby markets. MESDA documented, for example, that white pine lumber was transported all the way from New England into Charleston during the 18th century. This was in part because of the difficulty and expense of logging and transporting pine, cypress, and hardwoods from forests that were “moving” further away as nearby virgin forests were harvested or turned into farmland. Rivers were the most often used and practical means of transporting large logs from inland forests, but crossing swamps with large logs was impractical if not impossible. Virgin cypress trees grew in excess of 40 feet in circumferences.

Both Norfolk and Charleston certainly influenced consumer tastes and exported some furniture. For example, a group of corner cupboards is one of the numerically greatest known items carted out of the Norfolk area with six known. These corner cupboards are two-piece and of lightweight construction for easier transport and handling. Winterthur has two examples, and several are in southern collections. The most complete of the cupboards, the only one with its original pediment, was



found near Sunbury, North Carolina, which is just south of the Norfolk area and near a navigable water course (Fig. 6, Norfolk Corner Cupboard). However, it is unlikely more than a small portion of Colonial Norfolk furniture was transported overland to rural clients. Cabinetmakers were much more portable.



Figure 6

One of the major impediments to pinning down the origin of southern furniture is that so much was taken, especially early in the 20th century as collecting antiques became fashionable among the wealthy.

Following is a list detailing a minor portion of known examples:

- Two Seay pieces were recently repatriated from New England - the desk now at CWF and a secretary purchased in a northern auction by a private collector in Williamsburg.
- Another Seay secretary is back in a private collection in North Carolina after being held in a New York City apartment for decades.
- The Sharrock secretary listed as owned by the Tacoma Art Museum in MESDA's book was sold by a Pennsylvania dealer to a collector as being from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The collector later donated the piece to the Tacoma Art Museum, which later sold it in a California auction. It is now back in a private collection in North Carolina.
- A rectangular tea table similar to the one owned by CWF was purchased in an upstate New York auction and is now back in Virginia in a private collection.
- One of three known southern, Jacobean court cupboards is now in Wadsworth Atheneum.

These are just a few well-known examples. Sadly, these serve to exhibit it is unlikely that the material culture of the South will ever be fully known. Further obscuring southern origins, new “provenances” were created by major antique dealers to make items from the South more marketable and profitable. Again, beware the “story”.

While not suggested in institutional research, there is evidence for other possible southern origins for the hourglass tea table group.

#### Evidence for Edenton:

There are a several Colonial-era tables with long Edenton histories that share similar design traits to the hourglass group of tea tables. While these tables are of the vertical-leg type, they all have ball and claw feet with the rear, blade-like talons. However, there is a distinct offset of the rear talon from the lower leg on Edenton examples, while the rear talon on a known Norfolk example does not display this offset, but extends in an unbroken line from the lower leg (Fig. 7, Edenton Blade-Like Rear Talon).



Figure 7

Hopefully, additional examples will be discovered in the future to verify the consistency of this distinction. In addition, the knuckles on the talons and the webbing between the talons on Edenton examples are similar in design to those on the hourglass tea tables. The primary wood of all is mahogany with southern pine secondary. Edenton was also on the King's Highway as well as having an active and accessible port. These Edenton tables share more traits with the hourglass tea tables than any other published examples having long-documented histories in the South.

Evidence for other sources:

Because all of these premises are based on circumstantial evidence, it is still not possible to establish definitively the origin of the hourglass tea tables. It is useful to look further away to consider from where they may have been imported or from where a cabinetmaker who brought this style concept along with him may have come.

Evidence for Rhode Island:

Historically, the type of woods in furniture has represented one of the most often used methods to establish origin. The validity of this method is limited since all the examined tables are mahogany, so it would

initially appear to be of little direct use. In Colonial times mahogany was a highly desirable wood from the Caribbean, a trade in which Rhode Island merchants played a dominant role. Rhode Island was also a major exporter of venture furniture intended for coastal American and Caribbean island markets. It is worth noting that one well-documented Northeastern North Carolina, Colonial cabinetmaker was apparently trained in Newport, Thomas White. No records for this type of table known to be from Newport or an area nearby have surfaced in our research (Fig. 8, Rhode Island Tea Table, Yale University Art Gallery). So, is there another “candidate” for the origin of these tables?





Figure 8



## Evidence for Philadelphia:

Many tea tables found in the South, and it sometimes seems most found in Colonial America, have been attributed to Philadelphia. Books on antique furniture illustrate many more tea tables attributed to Philadelphia origin than from any other city or region. One might think that the taking of tea was only popular there! However, no Philadelphia tea table with hourglass-shaped collenettes was found in the research, and other stylistic features shared by the hourglass group do not appear on examples made in Philadelphia.

The inhabitants of Philadelphia preferred suppressed, full, and extended ball shaft profiles, along with large diameter discoids and carvings on the pillars of tea tables. That, plus the use of shell carvings on the knees, reduces Philadelphia as a logical source for this particular group of tea tables (Fig. 9, Philadelphia Tea Table, Courtesy of Leland Little Auctions).



Figure 9

The mahogany used in hourglass tea tables is of a straight-grained grade, not the highly figured material found on a number of Philadelphia tea tables. Highly figured mahogany was sold by wood merchants as a premium product; it was more expensive and required specialized tools and skills to work.

Figured mahogany was in greater demand in locales where ostentatious display was the vogue. The southern conservative preference for neat and plain by its citizens, in part, leads to few examples of early furniture with highly figured, solid-mahogany components. It is also likely that merchants exporting mahogany favored cities like Philadelphia where much higher prices could be extracted for highly figured material from wealthy, hyper-status conscious consumers. Of course, no enterprising southern cabinetmaker would pass up the opportunity to benefit from turning the occasional figured section of their mahogany inventory into a premium, more expensive offering. Later Classical southern furniture does begin to use the more highly figured mahogany in more locales, but that is more likely to be as veneer, not designs of solid wood elements.

In the South, attention to subtle design details was employed and relied on rather than using ornate carvings glued to flat surfaces. Tea tables might be unique among Colonial furniture in that virtually none use glued-on carvings. Carvings on tea tables are actually part of the structural wood. Neat and plain design techniques reflect a cultural attitude shared by many inhabitants throughout the Colonial South. For example, Thomas Newbern noted that the design of the legs of the hourglass table group, the transition of the lower leg to the ball, presents a similar effect to the chamfering on the back of Chippendale chair

splats or the underside of table tops. It created a lighter, more-airy, design statement; neat and plain style using attention to design instead of pasting on extraneous elements.

#### Evidence for New York:

Another possible origin is the New York City/Albany area based on comments from another research scholar of southern material culture. Examples of New York ball and claw foot tables that use strikingly similar ball and claw foot design were found in the literature reviewed. The primary similarity is the design of the webbing between the talon knuckles, the appearance of the talons, and a few straight-leg examples have a straight and narrow, fully formed, rear claw. However, no tripod tea tables were found with hourglass birdcage supports.

If New York was the source of the hourglass tea tables based on these similarities, it could also be argued that the known Edenton tables are from New York, since they share similar foot designs. However, the secondary wood in the straight-leg Chippendale tables attributed to Edenton, southern yellow pine, is useful evidence that makes New York an unlikely origin. Also, over seventy percent of known Edenton group examples descended in families who lived within fifteen miles of Edenton. Hard pine, as it was called in the north, is exactly the same

species as southern yellow pine and is microscopically identical. Hard (yellow) pine did grow in New England's virgin forests but in limited amounts. Institutional authorities and knowledgeable northern dealers generally agree that the yellow pine in northern forest was consumed well before the middle of the 18th century. *Note: While southern pine and northern hard pine are scientifically identical, one trait not seen in northern, hard yellow pine is what is referred to as lighter wood, highly resinous pine with an appearance of raw bacon.*

Evidence of an "imported" cabinetmaker:

While the origin of these tables may have occurred in another locale, it is also possible instead of the tables being exported as venture cargo that a cabinetmaker trained in another city relocated, bringing with him the requisite skills and design concepts. While no strong evidence has currently come to light of this entire "set" of specific design styles being popular in another American Colonial city or region, the design of the feet was popular in New York City.

Cabinetmakers "bring" styles with which they are familiar as part of their repertoire whether they come from Great Britain or another Colonial state. It is possible that a New York City or Great Britain trained cabinetmaker arrived in the South with the design of the

Chippendale feet and began producing tea tables for local sale. The colonnette design may have simply been adopted as an easier-to-turn design that was perfectly acceptable to customers with a preference for neat and plain. An hourglass-shaped colonnette, as a symmetrical element, had no specific vertical orientation making it easier to produce and impossible to install upside down, a two-for-one design innovation.

Comments about the research methods and logic used:

Auctions have long been how antique furniture is recycled back into the market as collectors die. With the advent of the Internet and online auction bidding platforms, auction records have become a valuable research tool to search through a large number of items for related examples. A search through images of several hundred tea-table auction records revealed only three tables with hourglass-style bird cage supports similar to this group that were not included in this article. A viable provenance for none were known, and all surfaced in auctions far apart, far inland, and far from any possible source of production based on the selected time frame.

In regard to New York as a possible origin of these tea tables, additional follow up field research appears to close that source as a possibility. An example of one of the hourglass birdcage tables was shown to a third-

generation furniture restorer who operated a shop between Albany and New York City. He had restored “hundreds” of tripod tea tables but had never seen one with the hourglass-shaped colonnettes. In addition, images of the hourglass tea tables were shown to several auctioneers in the same area that had been operating for decades, none recalled seeing a similar tea table with hourglass-birdcage supports. If these tables were a product of New York City or Albany it is likely that at least a few of these individuals would have been familiar with the design.

Through institutional and independent research there are now several known cabinetmakers operating shops on North Carolina’s coastal plain. Because these tables are mahogany and Colonial, they were most likely made in or near a southern port or at least near and likely east of the Fall Line. Transporting large and heavy goods, such as mahogany wood, west of the Fall Line would have been difficult and expensive which limited its use, especially with the abundant supply of local walnut and cherry. For collectors of southern Colonial era furniture having even a minor amount of mahogany used in combination with southern pine increases the likelihood it was made east of the Fall Line. While this does little to identify makers, it should give comfort to collectors interested in furniture from “Down East”.



## DIRECT PHYSICAL COMPARISON OF TABLES

A direct comparison of eight examples was the next step to define, understand, and document all the characteristics of this group down to the minor details. If reoccurring design elements could be identified, it opens the possibility that previously undocumented features can be used to identify other tables that belong to or are related to this group. These direct comparisons may also shed light on other issues. Were these tables produced by one shop, multiple shops, or via a collaborative arrangement among cabinet shops and turners, and are there regional traits that may place production within a particular area?

To be thorough, each of the major elements - top and battens, supporting box (birdcage), pillar (shaft), legs, feet, and the minor elements - feet design and carving details, other carvings, spiders (metal devices under the pillar that reinforces the connection of the legs to the pillar), original tool marks, finish, color of the individual wood elements, original screws, and catches were all reviewed. This detailed close examination provides granularity so examples with similar features may be evaluated as possibly being part of, or possibly related to, this group. This intense close inspection of several examples in a single day also improves the ability of those participating to recall and discern similarities and differences of tea tables independently examined later.

Each table, not part of the eight in the direct comparison, has its characteristics noted separately.

## TOP AND BATTENS

All tables firmly in this group use plain round tops of mahogany. Only one large diameter top was constructed from a single board, two tops were not original, and the other four have two board tops. The only refinement to the otherwise plain tops is a radiused edge. Only one currently known, the one with the smallest diameter 24-inch top, has moderately figured mahogany, while all the rest use straight grained mahogany. All but three of the tea tables have top widths that are close to 32 inches as measured with the grain with the largest being 33  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches across. *Note: When measured across the grain a period round 32 inch top would be  $\frac{3}{8}$  to  $\frac{5}{8}$  inch less in diameter due to wood shrinkage.*

There was no discernable evidence of attachment methods to a wood lathe used to turn the tops on any table examined. Some tea table tops have four widely, equally spaced holes that indicate attachment points to a mechanical holding fixture used to turn tops on a lathe (Fig. 10, Underside of Masonic Table).



Figure 10

It is likely the tops were glued to a holding fixture for turning on a lathe. Hide glue dissolved in water that could be accelerated by the adding heat, and it was used in a number of turning techniques such as the production of half spindles.

Battens were originally screwed to the tops using equally spaced screws on each batten. Only two table battens appeared to have a number of the original round-head screws. Typically, the screws on at least one end of the battens that had any original screws had replaced screws necessitated by dislocation caused by the cross-grain shrinkage of the top.

Additional screws are often added to battens in new locations during restoration, and several tables had “new” screws and new locations.

Batten profiles occurred in three variations. Most had a “flat” across  $\frac{1}{3}$  of its center that was approximately 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch high, a few formed a broad arc with the tallest height of approximately 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch near the center. Most tapered symmetrically towards both ends to a 1/2-inch vertical height.

Two independently examined tea tables had battens with a V-shaped profile with the taller portion of the V at the center. The one with carved Chippendale-style feet had webbing that extended only slightly down between the talons but did have the webbing of the “fourth claw”. The other had Queen Anne-style feet. Both appear to be associated with one another, possibly the same shop, but of a different production group from those in the direct comparison group. The tea table with the Queen Anne-style feet was the table associated with the Virginia Lees.

## BIRD CAGE

The four hourglass-shaped supports (colonnettes) in the birdcage were the initial feature that led to two tables being considered as part of a group. This feature can be quickly and easily observed even in small or poor quality images if the birdcage is visible. There are minor differences among the hourglass colonnettes. Some have minute discoids centered between the upper and lower hourglass turnings, and some have incised lines scribed onto the upper and lower hourglass (Fig. 11, Hourglass Colonnettes). Others are plain.



Figure 11

The vertical height of the colonnettes varied and therefore the birdcage ranged from a total height of  $4 \frac{1}{4}$  to  $3 \frac{3}{4}$  inches. The height of all the tea tables is within  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch of one another but the candlestands tend to be slightly shorter. All colonnettes penetrate the lower plate, several penetrate the upper plate, and most colonnette ends have a wedge inserted in its center to bind them to the birdcage plates.

In two of the birdcages, the upper hole receiving the pillar top penetrates through the top plate of the birdcage. In one of those, the upper hole is tapered to receive a turned taper at the top of the pillar. The taper is probably intended to maintain stability as it does not loosen from wear as would the straight-cut pillar tops.

None of the tables in this group use a “donut” shaped collar between the keeping key and the lower plate of the birdcage. This omission is rarely found in other tables employing a birdcage mechanism but is mentioned in the literature that a few tables with origins between New York City and Albany share this trait. It is more usual for a collar to be present, as it provides a larger bearing surface than does a key alone. The larger bearing surface makes turning the top easier and improves the stability of the top. If the key is driven in tightly, it would be difficult to rotate

the top on its pillar, but the stability of the top would be roughly equivalent to a tea table that employed a collar.

Four tables related to the group by other traits have colonnettes that use the more conventional vase-like turnings. Interestingly, the tea table that otherwise appears to be a nearly identical mate to the tea table at Tryon's Palace has colonnettes closer in shape to a vase. This notable difference of two, nearly otherwise identical tables highlights the importance of considering all the design elements when attempting to identify objects belonging to a group.

## PILLAR

There are two distinct pillar designs, five vase-shaped and three urn-shaped pillars. The two styles of pillars are each nearly identical to similar ones across the entire group of tables. This could be an indication that the shafts were turned by one shop using a pattern. What makes a single shop turning all the pillars unlikely is that only two of the tables appeared to have been made by the same shop based on all design traits and the presence of tooth plane marks on only those two.



Patterns were likely employed to produce consistent results for turned elements, but even with a pattern, minor differences would occur during the actual turning. It is possible that a separate shop, specializing in turning wood elements, produced the turned elements of these tables - the top, birdcage colonnettes, and pillar. Some in the cabinet trade used these dispersed, piecework production methods to increase efficiencies in an effort to increase output and reduce production cost.

Evidence to support this practice has been strongly documented for northern shops, but limited evidence of this practice has been offered for southern shops. Turned staircase balusters have been used in several regional studies by Yale and CWF researchers to suggest designs of turned furniture elements are related to a particular geographic area. Gateleg and stretcher-base table legs are the more likely candidates for this method of comparison. However, one baluster-design element, similar to the urn shaped pillars for this group of tables, was found as part of a staircase in an early house in New Bern (Fig. 12, Staircase Turning).



Figure 12

If all the mahogany parts of the table are closely matched in color and grain, it is likely that either the entire table was made by one shop or the shop provided the unfinished wood to turners from its own inventory. A

color difference in wood between the sawn and turned elements is uncommon. One could argue that this was simply that different wood was used in the same shop, and there can be considerable difference in the same species or tree. While that is possible, it would be likely that one or more of the legs would exhibit the same differences. Note that all types of tripod tables examined over decades with only one leg from wood noticeably different from the other two was invariably an indication of a replaced leg.

A second major variation among pillar designs occurs at the upper termination. One was tapered which appears to be a less frequent design feature among all tea tables examined. The tapered upper shaft would enhance stability of the top, especially as wear from turning the top accumulated.

## LEGS

All the physically examined tables in this study have ball and claw feet, while three examined independently or as photos have Queen Anne-style feet. All have cabriole legs joined into a central shaft with a dovetail at the upper end of each leg.

A previously unpublished but distinctive trait found on most of these tea tables is the presence of an unusual “fourth claw” underneath each leg. It is not actually a claw but more of a narrowing underneath the leg that extends from underneath the leg to join the lower portion of the ball, for editorial convenience it is referred to in this article as a fourth claw (Fig. 13, “Claw” or Undercut of Leg).



Figure 13

This fourth claw is more like a vertical web with no knuckle joint. While other tea tables outside this group have not been observed to share this design feature, it may have gone unnoticed and therefore undocumented. In most online images, it is difficult, if not impossible,

to discern the presence of this trait in many of the hundreds of images reviewed. A close-up of a foot at low photographic angle is required to capture this trait in an image. This feature is similar to the treatment of the offset, blade-like rear talons of the group of Edenton, straight-leg tables, and is basically identical to the non-offset rear talons of the Norfolk example.

The “lift” and overall “thickness/heaviness” of the legs varies among these examples. It is possible as the lift moves higher and the legs become lighter this may be an indication of later examples. The design trend toward “lightness” is most evident as the furniture forms progress through the furniture periods from pilgrim century to classical. It is less certain this applies within the bounds of a particular period’s style, although the dates assigned by scholars in many publications appear to support this proposition.

The two tea tables with the heaviest legs are also the only ones with hourglass colonnettes that do not display the full-length fourth claw (Fig. 14, Leg Without “Claw” or Undercut).





Figure 14

These two tables appear to have originated from the same shop based on the entire similarity of design elements and the use of a tooth plane underneath the top on one and the birdcage plates on the other. In these examples the claw is “undeveloped” compared to the other examples. If these are the earliest of the eight tea tables, it is possible that the webbed claw design followed in later examples to provide a lighter “look” and to present a more developed design concept.

All five of the other tea tables with ball and claw feet have the narrow web-like “claw” that extends from underneath the center of the leg to near the bottom of the ball. There are three distinctive styles of New

York ball and claw feet. The feet in this group are similar to one New York ball and claw foot design, particularly the “reach” and “tension” of the webbing between the talons and the design of the talons.

Three of the tables have carvings, two along the tops of the legs and one on the urn. This is the only table from this group or those separately examined with carving on its pillar (Fig. 15 Carved Urn of Tea Table).



Figure 15



Three other separately examined tables have carving on the legs. The table owned by Tryon's Palace has "heavy" legs that have the appearance of the lowest lift of the group. Its "mate" is visually identical except the birdcage colonnettes are vase like.

## COMPARISON OF MINOR ELEMENTS

### FEET KNUCKLES AND WEBBING

Seven of the tables physically examined in the group of eight have well defined knuckles, and the talons separate widely to provide the appearance of firmly gripping the ball (Fig. 16, Top View of Foot).



Figure 16

One smaller table had Queen Anne style feet. All seven with Chippendale feet have webbing between the talons that extends outward over the ball to the knuckle closest to the pillar and directly above the center of the ball. The webbing appears to stretch in tension between the knuckles, as would be expected as a bird of prey spreads its talons. This appears to be the same webbing design used in the straight-leg tables

attributed to Edenton. The webbing travels upward from the lower edge as a “valley” that is approximately half the width of the ball.

Of two other tea tables examined later, one had Queen Anne style feet and one had ball and claw feet. The one with ball and claw feet had a much less pronounced webbing but still retained the fourth claw.

#### FOURTH CLAW

Two tea tables have a less developed claw underneath. Instead, a slight relief is carved between the lower leg and the ball. These two tables are the most similar in overall design, have tooth plane marks underneath the top or birdcage plates, have minor discoids in between the colonnettes, and appear to be the earliest of the group. This may be an indication of a “first” design. The blade-like fourth claw may be an improvement as it provides a lighter, more refined appearance.

#### CARVING

In total six tables, three in the direct comparison and three independently examined, have carving along the top curve of the legs. Five are asymmetrical designs, which is one of the defining characteristics of rococo design. Other distinctive elements of the carvings are vine-



tendrils designs; and two had five petal flowers, and one had four petal flowers near the upper end of the leg. Five-petal flowers are historically referred to as the Tudor Rose that was used in architectural and other decorations in the Tudor period in England (Fig. 17, Carving and Tudor Rose). None had shells that are found on Philadelphia tea table legs.



Figure 17

The table at Tryon's Palace and its "mate" had Tudor-style roses carved in the upper portion of each leg and nearly symmetrical, leg carvings that covered the middle two thirds of each leg. One of the two tea tables examined later had a four-petal rose carved in the upper portion of each leg and asymmetrical vine and leaf carvings that reached over half-way down each leg.

Under the legs of the most tables immediately next to the pillar are arches carved to the underside of the legs, and centered between the legs on the underside of the pillar is a similar arch carved into the base.

These appear to provide a break in what would otherwise be a wide, nearly straight line. This is a subtle stylistic design element that imparts a lightness to the overall appearance of the table and is often seen on other tripod tea table designs.

## CATCHES

All but one of the tables use what would have been a commercially available, brass catch, in the same sense that brasses and similar hardware were available as imported goods in Colonial times. One tea table uses a wrought-iron catch that may have been a commercially available item or that could be locally made by a blacksmith. This same

wrought-iron catch has been observed on a number of different style tripod tables, so it seems likely it was commercially available. Brass versus iron may have been an option for the customer if the customer believed brass to be a better choice for appearance. Functionally, the wrought-iron catches hold the top in its horizontal position better and are more durable. The smaller brass catches are less sturdy and are often replaced as evidenced by holes near and around several present brass catches.

## SPIDER

All but one of the tables use a wrought iron “spider” that provides a method to reinforce the dovetail connections between the pillar and each leg (Fig. 18, Spider). One of the spiders was inserted into the bottom of the pillar and upper portion of the underside of the legs as if to conceal the spider from view from above.





Figure 18

## FINISH

Only one of these tables has what may be the original finish on the base, but it may simply be an old finish or an old finish over the original finish. All of the tops were refinished. It is not unusual to refinish the



top surface, even in tea tables that otherwise have what appears to be an original or at least old finish. The condition of the table that appears to have an original finish is so good that the layout scribe lines underneath the legs are clearly visible from the center of the dovetail to the end of the furthest talon. In fact, one foot still had the perpendicular layout line across the foot to the ends of the two side talons. The layout lines were visible under several other table legs further from the feet. These marks aided the cabinetmakers in producing a symmetrical leg, and its presence is an indication of the originality of the surface.

While the size, shape, and lift of the legs varies, the overall design of the ball and claw carving and the finishing underneath the legs are fairly consistent.

## TOP RETENTION

None the tea tables examined use a “donut” between the pillar key and the lower birdcage plate, which is very unusual (Fig. 19, Donut).

The shaft key is the sole method to retain the top to the pillar while permitting rotation of the top around the pillar. It is possible, but seems unlikely, that the craftsmen who produced these tables were unfamiliar with the benefit of using the donut. It could be that there was no desire to rotate the tables so there was no need for the method that permitted it.

If the key is driven in tightly the table will be stable but difficult to rotate.



Figure 19

## FASTENERS

Spiders were attached with screws or rosehead nails. Those attached with rosehead nails were undisturbed, an indication of original construction. Some that used screws obviously used replaced screws and may have originally used nails that had loosed over time. Some

screws had slightly offset slots, an indication of a handmade screw, and might have been entirely original and undisturbed.

A few round-head screws were still present in a few battens, but likely, all tops had been reset to the battens. Shrinkage invariably breaks the screws on at least one end of the batten

## CONCLUSION

This conclusion may better be called “INCONCLUSIVE” since it does not provide a definitive answer where the hourglass tea tables were made. Unfortunately, none have been found with the ultimate provenance, a maker’s signature, or documented origins - a provenance. All evidence to date that has been offered, but all research is open to interpretation. The strongest evidence to date of origin is that so many have been found in the South, not in other locations. The relationship of the design features of the hourglass, tea-table group to the Norfolk region should not be overlooked. Design follows trade patterns. Norfolk was the commercial center of a region that reached from Virginia’s Eastern Shore to Petersburg to North Carolina’s Albemarle region during the Colonial period. Evidence shows that these tables were made in a number of different shops, and those of known family

descent were from the region surrounding Norfolk. This group of tea tables is an example of a regional design.

The first successful hourglass tea tables, in design and sales, probably established the pattern for those that followed. The visual comparative evidence points to tea tables with the hourglass colonnette as being produced by more than one shop. The consistency of the woods used in all elements on every table, the lack of evidence for a specialized turner's jig to hold the top for turning, and the difference in the business propositions between venture versus local trade all cast doubt that turning tea table elements was "farmed out" to a separate shop specializing in turned wooden elements. To elaborate on venture versus local trade, consider the inherent nature of the two business propositions:

- Local was more personal, usually one-on-one between the master and the customers.
- Local was more attuned to local tastes and could "customize" known designs, add patron's initials, or any other penchant for details expressed by a customer.
- Local could provide furniture in any wood or wood variety with any level of attention to detail a customer wanted to pay - carvings, ebonizing, inlay, etc.

- Local was treated as a craft with the mysteries of the trade closely held, shared only with apprentices and possibly “friendly” competitors.
- Local depended on the success of the master’s skill at the bench, in training apprentices, and with customer relations.
- Venture succeeded with the highest output at the lowest cost.
- Venture produced nearly identical designs of furniture forms that were customized to pack as many as possible onboard a ship.
- Venture used the lowest cost woods or variety of woods and probably was a training ground for apprentices. While premium items were certainly exported, they were likely bespoke items for which payment was in hand.
- Venture required an openness with other shops providing services, such as turners working for cabinet makers, and probably finishers.
- Venture was dependent on an extensive range of “partners”, such as other shops, shippers, banks and insurers underwriting shipments, sea captains, and the sea.

Probably the biggest initial impediment to the success of venture furniture was the lack of a personal relationship with the potential buyer. Through time, an even greater impediment was overland transportation as settlements grew further and further from seaports.

The taking of tea was a worldwide cultural phenomenon that created consumer demand for tea tables and accompanying accessories. A confluence of events led to its demise as America transitioned from a colony to an independent nation. There is no doubt that tea was popular in Edenton as evidenced by the Edenton Tea Party less than a year after the more “famous” Boston Tea Party. In a contemporary way, Edenton’s is more notable. It was a political first as Edenton women penned and signed the petition!

Hopefully, more history will come to light about these tea tables, the craftsmen that made them, and the Colonials who purchased them.